DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 156 685 TM 007 088

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TITLE A Construct Validation of Fear of Success.
PUB DATE May 77
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association (Albuquerque, New Mexico, May, 1977) ; Appendix A may be marginally legible due to small type

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Achievement Need; Affiliation Need; *Failure Factors; *Fear of Success; Higher Education; *Projective Tests; Questionnaires; *Sex Differences; *Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes; Student Attitudes; Success Factors; *Test Validity; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Construct Validity; Fear of Success Questionnaire (Pappo); Sex Role Stereotype Scale (Rosenkrantz Broverman); Wellesley Role Orientation Scale

ABSTRACT

Fear of success, as traditionally measured by Horner's projective medical school cue and as measured by Pappo's Fear of Success Questionnaire, was examined in an exploratory attempt at validating the fear of success construct. Sixty-eight male and 119 female undergraduates were administered a battery of tests designed to measure fear of success, sex-role stereotypes and orientation, achievement motivation, and affiliative needs. Males wrote more fear of success stories than did females. The two measures of fear of success did not correlate with each other, and correlated only weakly with some of the other variables from a sex role stereotyping questionnaire and the Wellesley Role Orientation Scale. The hypothesis that the conflict between achievement and affiliative needs leads to fear of success was not substantiated. Since the construct and its measures appeared to be weak, further directions for research are indicated. (Author/CTM)

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ED156685

A Construct Validation of Fear of Success

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Paper Presented to

The Rocky Mountain Psychological Association

Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 1977

TM 007 088

A Construct Validation of Fear of Success

Elizabeth Bull Sellers and Verne C. Keenan

For the last thirty years or so, psychologists have been interested in studying the need for achievement, which they define as a desire to be competent or successful in situations where there are standards of excellence (Atkinson, 1958; McClelland et al., 1953). Much research has been done concerning this need in males, but, since women did not show as much evidence of the need, they were rarely studied. Matina Horner suggested in 1968 that women do have a desire to achieve, but they are also anxious about achieving because they expect negative consequences such as social rejection or feelings of being unfeminine as a result of being too successful. She called this conflict the motive to avoid success or a fear of success. Horner measured fear of success in women with the following TAT-type verbal cue: "After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her medical school class." A John form of the same cue was given to male subjects.

A substantial amount of research on fear of success has been done over the last nine years using Horner's method. The research has yielded several interesting findings. Among these have been the following:

1. Fear of success is more often evident in females than in males (Horner, 1968, 1970, 1972). Males have been found to show some fear of success, but this usually involves questionning the value of success and not fearing the effect of the success itself (Hoffman, 1974).

2. Both males and females respond with more fear of success imagery to the Anne form of the medical school cue than the John form--suggesting

learned cultural patterns which downgrade the successful female (Feather & Raphelson, 1974; Monahan, Kuhn, & Shaver, 1974).

3. Fear of success increases with age and is particularly high in high school seniors and college upper-classwomen (Horner, 1970; Kimball, 1973). This seems to be because those are the times when a woman is most concerned with decisions involving a conflict between career (achievement) and marriage (affiliation). Fear of success decreases in married women returning to school (Tomlinson-Keasey, 1974).

4. Fear of success seems to be correlated with both socio-economic background and ability (Horner, 1970). The higher the socio-economic status of the woman's family, the more she tends to fear success. In addition, the conflict is highest in women who are the most able to succeed.

Method

There were several objectives in the current research (Sellers, 1977), but the major one dealt with an examination of the medical school cue used to elicit fear of success imagery and more importantly the construct itself.

Sixty-eight male and 119 female university freshmen and sophomores were administered a battery of tests in the fall of 1976. Samples of these are given in Appendix A.

The subjects were first asked to write five projective stories in response to the following verbal cues which were used to elicit achievement, affiliative, and fear of success imagery.

1. David (Carol) is looking into his (her) microscope.
2. Nancy (Steven) is sitting in a chair with a smile on her (his) face.

3. A young man (woman) is talking about something important with an older person.

4. At the end of the school day, Barbara (Richard) is going back to the school lab.

5. After first term finals, Anne (John) finds herself (himself) at the top of her (his) medical school class.

The cues were administered with the standard McClelland et al. (1953) instructions for a neutral condition. A random half of the subjects received the main stem, the other half, the form in parentheses. The medical school cue (number 5) was scored only for fear of success imagery while the other four cues were scored for achievement and affiliative concerns.

Following the stories, the subjects were asked to respond to three questionnaires (see Appendix A). The first of these was the Sex-Role Stereotype Questionnaire developed by Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Boverman, and Boverman in 1968. This scale contains 41 bipolar descriptors on which each subject was asked to rate the typical male, then the typical female (for half of the subjects this order was reversed), and finally themselves.

The second questionnaire was an objective measure of fear of success (Pappo, 1972) with 83 yes/no statements. The last scale (which was given only to the women because it is female specific) was the Wellesley Role-Orientation Scale (Alper, 1973, 1974). This is a 24-item scale designed to measure the extent to which a woman holds a traditional or non-traditional view of her role.

Results and Conclusions

The frequencies of fear of success responses in the current research were different from those found in other research. While Horner (1968, 1970, 1972), Hoffman (1974), and others found rates for a variety of females responding to the Anne medical school cue to be in excess of 60 percent, this research found a considerably lower frequency of 27 percent. The early great discrepancy between the sexes (Horner, 1968) seems to be disappearing as males and females move closer together in their fear of success responses (Feather & Raphelson, 1974; Hoffman, 1974; Monahan et al., 1974). That trend was also reflected here. Males in this sample writing about John wrote fear of success stories 37 percent of the time. This was the highest level across sex and cue. There are at least two possible explanations for these differences.

1. The scoring criteria seem to have varied from study to study. This research was no exception. Rather than two categories (as Horner and many others have used), this analysis employed three by introducing a middle range of ambivalent success/coping stories.

2. With the women's movement has come a trend of reducing the stereotypic nature of sex-roles. This has affected males as well as females such that females are now more able to be achievement or success oriented while males are receiving less pressure to be successful in the traditional sense. Stereotypes do still exist as was found here with the SRSQ, but perhaps the pressure for individuals to conform to those stereotypes is decreasing.

Summary statistics for the objective measures are given in Table I. As shown in the table, the reliabilities of the scales were found to be adequate.

TABLE I

SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

Variable/ Scale	No. of Items	Possible Range	Observed Range	Mean Score (Standard Deviation)		
				Females	Males	All Subjects
FOSQ	83	0-83	12.0-61.0	39.1 (10.2)	40.7 (10.4)	39.9 (10.4)
WROS	21	0-21	5.4-16.4	8.7 (2.0)	--	--
Masculinity Score--SRSQ	60	0-60	26.1-46.6	36.7 (4.0)	35.9 (3.4)	36.4 (3.8)
Femininity Score--SRSQ	60	0-60	14.9-36.0	26.1 (3.8)	24.2 (3.3)	25.4 (3.7)
Self Score SRSQ	60	0-60	19.1-42.3	29.5 (4.2)	34.4 (3.4)	31.2 (4.6)
Difference Score M-F SRSQ	60	0-60	3.5-35.6	16.0 (6.1)	17.3 (4.8)	16.5 (5.7)
Difference Score S-F/SRSQ	60	0-60	4.1-32.8	12.6 (4.3)	17.3 (4.5)	--
Difference Score S-M/SRSQ	60	0-60	4.3-33.8	16.7 (5.2)	12.0 (4.0)	--

Variable/Scale	Reliability Coefficients		
	Internal Consistency	Standardized Item Alpha	Guttman Split-Half
FOSQ	.87	.86	.78
WROS	.72	.74	.74
Masculinity Score--SRSQ	.84	.85	.82
Femininity Score--SRSQ	.84	.85	.82
Self Score SRSQ	.84	.84	.86
Difference Score M-F/SRSQ	--	--	--
Difference Score S-F/SRSQ	--	--	--
Difference Score S-M/SRSQ	--	--	--

Each subject received a total of fourteen scores:

1. Achievement imagery in response to a male cue;
2. Achievement imagery in response to a female cue;
3. Affiliative imagery in response to a male cue;
4. Affiliative imagery in response to a female cue;
5. Fear of success imagery in response to a medical school cue;
6. Sex of subject;
7. An objective fear of success score from the FOSQ;
8. A traditionality score from the WROS;
9. A masculinity score from the SRSQ;
10. A feminity score from the SRSQ;
11. A self rating from the SRSQ;

12-14. Derived scores based on the average differences between male and female (12), self and female (13), and self and male (14) ratings.

A correlation matrix including all of the above variables is given in Table II (page 7).

The two measures of fear of success (the medical school cue and the FOSQ) did not correlate with each other ($r = .02$)--a finding consistent with the results of previous research (Cann, 1975; Curtis et al., 1975). The two measures seemed rather to lean toward a curvilinear correlation with subjects writing middle range coping stories receiving higher FOSQ scores than those writing either unambivalent success stories or fear of success stories. Although this tendency is not statistically significant at this time, it would appear to be worth checking out further. In addition, the FOSQ may better be labeled a fear of failure measure than a fear of

success scale. The FOSQ relies heavily on statements concerning competitive areas, and several of the subjects, in discussing the measures after a pilot test, felt that the questions on the FOSQ reflected their reservations about the possibility of failing if they pushed too hard rather than a tendency to avoid success or a fear of being ultimately successful.

TABLE II

PEARSON CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS

	Ach/Male	Ach/Female	Aff/Male	Aff/Female	FOS/med cue	Sex	FOSQ	WROS	SRSQ:Masc.	SRSQ:Fem.	SRSQ:Self	Diff/M-F	Diff/S-F
Ach/Female	.08												
Aff/Male	-.21[c]	-.02											
Aff/Female	.04	-.27[c]	-.11[a]										
FOS/med cue	-.02	-.02	-.08	.05									
Sex	-.04	.01	-.01	-.01	-.06								
FOSQ	-.13[b]	-.15[b]	.10[a]	.14[b]	.02	-.06							
WROS	-.09	-.06	.16[b]	-.01	-.14[a]	--	.12						
SRSQ:Masc.	.01	.01	.11[a]	.13[b]	-.20[c]	.09	.08	.22[c]					
SRSQ:Fem.	.20[c]	.09	-.13[b]	-.03	-.01	.25[d]	-.11[a]	-.22[c]	-.14[b]				
SRSQ:Self	.10[a]	.02	.01	.03	.01	-.52[d]	-.19[c]	-.30[d]	.02	.00			
Diff/M-F	-.15[b]	-.07	.16[b]	.08	-.07	-.11[a]	.13[b]	.30[d]	.63[d]	-.68[d]	-.04		
Diff/S-F	-.04	-.07	.06	.00	.08	-.47[d]	.02	-.01	.17[c]	-.43[d]	.49[d]	.55[d]	
Diff/S-M	-.16[b]	-.02	.05	-.04	-.02	.42[d]	.04	.34[d]	.31[d]	-.10[a]	-.53[d]	.50[d]	.12[d]

[a] $p < .10$
[b] $p < .05$
[c] $p < .01$
[d] $p < .001$

Multiple regression analyses were also performed using the fear of success scores as dependent variables. The results of the FOSQ analysis did not produce definite conclusions but did suggest some directions for further research. While both sexes had similar scores, only the females' scores correlated well with some other variables: a lack of achievement

motivation in response to female cues and a traditionally feminine view of themselves. Neither of these variables, however, were strong enough to emerge as predictors of FOSQ scores.

Multiple regression results with the medical school cue were a little better but not as decisive as had been hoped (see Table III). While some

TABLE III

MULTIPLE REGRESSION FOR FEAR OF SUCCESS: MEDICAL SCHOOL CUE

Female Subjects

Variable Entered	Simple R	Multiple R	R^2	Overall F	Level of Significance
Masculinity Score	-.220	.220	.049	5.768	.018
Affiliation/Female	.144	.276	.076	4.634	.012

Male Subjects

Variable Entered	Simple R	Multiple R	R^2	Overall F	Level of Significance
Self Score	-.252	.252	.063	4.393	.040
Diff Score: S-F	.128	.380	.144	5.414	.007
Femininity Score	-.018	.423	.179	4.563	.006

All Subjects

Variable Entered	Simple R	Multiple R	R^2	Overall F	Level of Significance
Masculinity Score	-.198	.198	.039	7.436	.007
Diff Score: S-F	.073	.226	.051	4.878	.009

predictor variables did emerge in the regression equations, they did not account for very much of the variance (17.9 percent or less in three different analyses). Fear of success stories appeared to be a small function of a woman's non-traditional view of the male role and her own positive feelings about the appropriateness of affiliative concerns for females. Both of these functions might indicate an inability to deal with success,

i.e., males shouldn't be so success-oriented and females should be more concerned with affiliative needs.

Not only did the males who fear success (as measured by the medical school cue) tend to rate females in the traditional direction, they also saw themselves, as men, to be less masculine than the typical male. This latter factor might well cause a resentment toward or dislike of successful people or a moving away from traditional values for themselves and therefore having strong reservations about the need to be successful.

Although the measures of the construct appear weak, the concept itself emerges as even weaker. The strongest correlations available for either of the measures is a not very impressive .20; sex differences, which have been assumed to be responsible for the "fear" in women, are insignificant across most all of the measures; and even the "trends" that emerge are contradictory and unclear. Perhaps it is not the people who deny or downgrade success who fear its effect, but those who recognize a conflict, confront their ambivalence, and deal with it. This middle "coping" group seemed to be exhibiting the trends most frequently associated with fear of success: (a) they scored higher on the FOSQ, (b) they responded with consistently higher than average achievement imagery scores for both males and females and recognized females as being concerned with affiliative needs, (c) they tended to rate males as more masculine and females as less feminine than the sample average, and (d) they rated themselves in less stereotyped directions than the "typical" man or woman.

If there is something that can be called fear of success--which it seems there is even if the evidence is only intuitive--then it seems to warrant

more detailed study. Further work assuming the construct is valid should not be undertaken until more work has been done to verify the construct itself.

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APPENDIX A

FEAR OF SUCCESS QUESTIONNAIRE (FOSQ)

Following are statements which reflect some problems which may or may not face college students. Please indicate how you personally feel about the statements by circling yes if you agree with the statement as it stands and no if you disagree.

Yes No 1. It is easy for me to concentrate on my studies.

Yes No 2. I find it difficult to tell my friends that I do something especially well.

Yes No 3. Frequently, at crucial points in an intellectual discussion, my mind goes blank.

Yes No 4. Often times, I become self-conscious when someone who "counts" compliments me.

Yes No 5. Generally, when I complete an important project I am satisfied with the results.

SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPE QUESTIONNAIRE (SRSQ)

1. Not at all aggressive — Very aggressive

0 10 20 30 40 50 60

2. Not at all adventurous — Very adventurous

0 10 20 30 40 50 60

3. Not at all independent — Very independent

0 10 20 30 40 50 60

4. Not at all emotional — Very emotional

0 10 20 30 40 50 60

5. Not at all easily influenced — Very easily Influenced

0 10 20 30 40 50 60

WELLESLEY ROLE-ORIENTATION SCALE (WROS)

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the following sentences. If you strongly agree with the statement as it stands, circle the number 7; if you neither agree nor disagree, circle 4; and if you strongly disagree, circle 1. It is important that you circle the number which reflects how you personally feel about the statement and not how you think others would feel. There are, of course, no right or wrong answers.

1-- Strongly disagree; 2-- disagree; 3-- slightly disagree;
4-- Neither disagree nor agree; 5-- slightly agree; 6-- agree;
7-- strongly agree

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1. If I were married and had children, I would prefer not to have a job.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 2. I think that college girls, in general, tend to be impolite.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 3. I believe that aggressiveness and drive are more valuable personality attributes for men than for women.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 4. Since women are less apt to complete their training, preference should be given to men in admission to medical school.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 5. I object to jobs where I have to wear uniforms which make me appear less feminine.